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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Snelling, C. (2016). "School's out!": a Test of Education's Turnout-Raising Potential. *Intergenerational Justice Review*, 2(1), 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.24357/igjr.8.1.447>

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# “School’s out!” A Test of Education’s Turnout-Raising Potential

by Charlotte Snelling<sup>1</sup>

**A**bstract: Youth turnout in the UK is falling despite young people representing arguably the most educated generation. This article examines education’s role in social sorting, contending that the positive impact of educational expansion on electoral participation is tempered by relative education concerns. Using the 2011 UK Citizens in Transition Survey, it argues that education affects turnout by determining young people’s positioning within social networks. Some of these networks are more politicised than others. Individuals with relatively lower educational status continue to be excluded from more politically engaged networks – irrespective of their educational attainment – and as such lack the mobilisation and greater sense of political efficacy required to vote.

## Introduction

The positive relationship between education and electoral turnout at the individual level is so well-established to be largely uncontested.<sup>2</sup> Thought to raise levels of political interest and confer skills and knowledge required for voting, studies across Western democracies consistently find significant evidence to this effect; electors with higher levels of education demonstrate a greater likelihood of voting than those with lower levels.<sup>3</sup> It could reasonably be assumed that as the UK’s demographic profile becomes more educated, its population will become increasingly electorally participative. Brody,<sup>4</sup> however, has highlighted a “puzzle of participation”, observing that educational expansion had been accompanied not by rising but declining turnout. This is especially notable among young people, arguably the most educated generation of all and yet the least participative. To what extent, therefore, is a more educated youth electorate an effective and satisfactory remedy for tackling low youth electoral participation? Despite extensions to compulsory schooling in the UK and increased numbers entering higher education (HE)<sup>5</sup> – a 44% increase in students between 1999 and 2009<sup>6</sup> – only 44% of 18-24 year olds were estimated to have voted in the 2010 general election, versus a 65% average.<sup>7</sup> With voting often habitual<sup>8</sup>, fears are that if

young people abstain now, generational replacement will see electorate-wide turnout falling even further. Equally, these young people risk growing political marginalisation if parties are tempted to gear policy programmes primarily towards the voting “grey majority”.<sup>9</sup> Questions subsequently arise as to why educational expansion has seemingly failed to engender a more electorally participative youth and whether strategies aimed at reversing current trends can rely upon education alone to act as a key agent of pro-voting socialisation.

On the one hand, there are arguments that as young people enjoy more education they also become more critical, less deferential towards politics, leading them to be selective in their participation.<sup>10</sup> Entry into HE may also delay the transition into “adulthood” and thus the point at which politics can appear more relevant.<sup>11</sup> Both arguments focus on the young people benefitting most from educational expansion, namely the increasing number who are attending university. Conversely, in a departure from such theories, in this article I examine the contribution of less-well educated young people – individuals aged 18-24 years who do not go to university – to the youth turnout puzzle, considering how and to what extent educational expansion affects their electoral behaviours.

“With voting often habitual, fears are that if young people abstain now, generational replacement will see electorate-wide turnout falling even further.”

Certainly, nearly all young people today are “more” educated than in the past – in 1974 as many as 72% of British Election Study respondents left school at 16 compared to just 29% in 2005<sup>12</sup> – and yet individuals outwith HE cannot be assumed to have experienced the advantages of educational expansion in the same way as those attending university. Taking inspiration from Nie et al.’s sorting model<sup>13</sup> in which aggregate increases in education do little to alter an individual’s relative status and connections, I argue that education performs an important positioning role. A young person’s

social position can influence their political recruitment as well as how they view the political system and themselves as potential participants in it. These may then affect turnout, the ever lower positioning associated today with non-HE experiences leaving this group lacking mobilisation, feeling inefficacious, and ultimately reluctant to vote, irrespective of their absolute education level. Using the 2011 Citizens in Transition Study,<sup>14</sup> I find that social networks and internal efficacy can mediate education’s impact on turnout. I conclude by highlighting implications this has for education’s potential role in remedies designed to encourage participation.

## Education and electoral participation

Education is typically associated with an increase in electoral participation potential. Dee finds each additional year in education increases the likelihood of voting by an average of 3.8 percentage points.<sup>15</sup> It is not within the remit of this paper to explore reasons for this correlation and with a wide pool of literature already available, it is possible simply to summarise the key arguments. Within classic civic education theory, education supports the development of political skills, knowledge, and interest, all of which are considered necessary resources and mobilisers for voting;<sup>16</sup> individuals become more capable of participating while increasingly believing there is reason to do so. Through education, they can also acquire practical understanding, for instance how to register and cast a ballot.<sup>17</sup> Without this they may lack confidence and feel ill-equipped to participate. Indeed, studies show that young people who report to be lacking sufficient understanding of politics are more likely to abstain.<sup>18</sup> Frequently viewed within rational choice thinking, education here lowers the anticipated costs of voting and heightens prospective benefits. This occurs both through formal teaching and informal extracurricular activities. Evidently within certain subjects, for instance social sciences and humanities, skills such as document analysis and critical thinking might be especially relevant in supporting political participation.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, with

citizenship education introduced into English schools in 2001, many young people entering the electorate today should have at least some comprehension of politics, and more so than would be expected for previous generations.<sup>20</sup> Given its recent introduction however, its precise impact is still being assessed. Within universities, student unions also run elections and campaigns, political parties are represented by student societies, debates are held, and political figures are frequently invited to speak.<sup>21</sup> Students can become politically informed while gaining experience of democratic processes prior to any formal electoral participation and irrespective of variation in academic learning.

“Through education, individuals can also acquire practical understanding, for instance how to register and cast a ballot. Without this they may lack confidence and feel ill-equipped to participate.”

Analysis using British Election Studies, February 1974 to present day,<sup>22</sup> demonstrates that while turnout has been falling across all groups in the UK, this has been most pronounced among young people without HE experience (Figure 1). Just two-fifths reported voting in 2010 (39.1%) compared to 67.5% of their HE counterparts. We could think this results from their missing out on many of the politicising forces associated with HE and/or their experiencing comparatively less education. Superficially, there is support for a civic education hypothesis. However, since the school leaving age has risen over time it remains unclear as to why extra years in education alongside the possible experience of citizenship-style

education leaves this group being so under-participative within the wider electorate and with a widening participation gap. Figure 1 further justifies a focus on those individuals “left behind” by educational expansion, those who do not enjoy its full rewards – namely, entry into university and related benefits. It is non-HE young people contributing more than any others to low and falling youth turnout.

### The mechanisms of relative education and social sorting

A number of authors have considered the possible conditionality of individual-level education effects on levels of education in the environment, stated most notably in Nie et al.’s seminal sorting model.<sup>23</sup> Contrasted with additive effects theories in which rising education levels generate growing support for democracy across all groups,<sup>24</sup> they claim a more educated electorate negatively impacts individual turnout by affecting notions of relative education.<sup>25</sup> They argue that while education levels may have risen, entrenched hierarchies remain and mitigate the possibility of relatively less well-educated individuals (within a generational cohort) turning out in line with traditional expectations. In the past, staying in school beyond the age of 14-16 years in the UK may have been sufficient to ensure an individual felt able and inclined to participate in society, and by association in politics. It was a common phenomenon. Now with increasing entry into HE, school-level qualifications have fallen in value. There is educational inflation; as “average levels of education in the population have risen, each individual has needed ever more

education to be positioned at the top of the class hierarchy.”<sup>26</sup> Education is therefore a proxy for social position here, absolute skills and knowledge playing only a minor role in determining turnout.

“In the past, staying in school beyond the age of 14-16 years in the UK may have been sufficient to ensure an individual felt able and inclined to participate [...]. Now with increasing entry into HE, school-level qualifications have fallen in value.”

Much research adopts multi-level approaches, modelling turnout potential based on electors’ individual education interacted with that of the society or community in which they live.<sup>27</sup> However, the underexplored question of why relative differences in education matter for turnout persists, particularly given that the act of voting is not in itself competitive (one person voting does not prevent another) nor directly related to social position. Pattie and Johnston state: “Showing that voting patterns are consistent with contextual effects is not the same as demonstrating that such effects operate. It is necessary to uncover the mechanisms by which these contextual effects bring their influence to bear.”<sup>28</sup> Persson agrees that by focusing only on empirical tests of the relationship between individual and aggregate education, studies do “not allow for direct examination of the causal mechanism(s).”<sup>29</sup> By studying specifically the causal mechanisms here I can build on thoughts about why a relatively lower level of education continues to see non-HE young people abstain and overwhelm the positive impact of their absolute education having risen compared to that of older generations. The analysis in this paper consequently moves away from classic sorting model tests which typically utilise longitudinal, multi-level data. Rather I examine the extent to which differential turnout relates to social positioning’s mediating of education effects.

Such mechanisms are linked to a concept of *social network centrality*, concerned with the nature of the contacts and connections individuals can access and cultivate through their educationally-derived, environmentally-assessed social position.<sup>30</sup> As the authors themselves suggest, this is not always suitable for young people who, often still being in education, are yet to be formally sorted. However, given young people’s lack of electoral habits, political inexperience, and

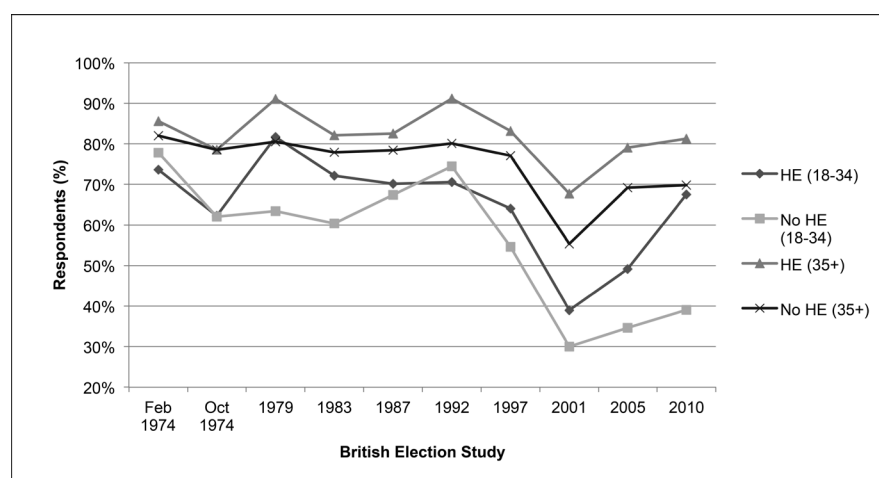


Figure 1: Absolute turnout at UK General Elections by age and HE experience, Feb 1974 to 2010. Source: British Election Studies Feb 1974 to 2010, n ranging from 1,874 to 3,955 (weighted by official turnout)

lifecycle stage, it is my contention that they may be especially susceptible to processes connected to the wider concept of relative education and positioning.<sup>31</sup> Different social networks and status levels are arguably already found to operate across different educational settings and young people do not need to have graduated to feel or experience these.<sup>32</sup>

For Nie et al., a high level of education is connected with high social status which supports interaction with influential social and political networks.<sup>33</sup> These determine the likelihood of direct political recruitment, individuals at the centre of these networks being invited to participate by peers who have an interest in encouraging greater participation by those with whom they share a stake in society. This is important because as Verba and colleagues explain, being asked to participate is a powerful mobiliser for political action.<sup>34</sup> By being both direct and targeted, such a “push factor” can overcome other obstacles or misgivings about participating.<sup>35</sup>

Student-led voter registration drives on university campuses offer a good example relevant to the youth population, further demonstrating how these effects can be operative even before formal sorting takes place; they are a direct attempt by individuals to target their peers and support their participation.<sup>36</sup> Non-HE young people are less easily targeted (being more widely dispersed) while as a group already less likely to vote, they can present as more costly to mobilise.<sup>37</sup> They are inevitably often neglected by campaign activities. Following the decline of other traditional mobilising forces, for instance trade unions and even the family, an “institutional lacuna” for non-HE young people is perhaps now especially apparent.<sup>38</sup> Thus the settings in which education positions young people may have a direct and significant impact on the level of political mobilisation they encounter.

Crucially, positioning within socially important and more politicised networks can also generate less overt yet still powerful normative forces to encourage voting. Individuals respond to political cues and often adhere to expected behaviours within their immediate networks. The reputational cost of not voting, for example, could be high for those who have strong political connections but not for those for whom voting and civic engagement are not dominant social norms.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, being in an environment in which politics is discussed

and peers are politically active can have informational spill-over effects. It encourages greater awareness of politics and makes voting at elections appear more relevant.<sup>40</sup> These normative influences can be particularly strong among young people who are yet to develop their own electoral habits.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, while HE students are still in the process of becoming highly educated, if we are talking of social positioning, the role of universities transmitting pro-voting norms cannot be ignored. Contrastingly, disadvantaged young people, typically with no HE experience, are less likely to encounter similar vicarious experiences. Thus their compulsion to vote is reduced.

**“Given young people’s lack of electoral habits, political inexperience, and lifecycle stage [...] they may be especially susceptible to processes connected to the wider concept of relative education and positioning.”**

I argue, however, that the role of positioning and networks within traditional sorting model approaches can and should be developed further if thinking about young people in their formative political years. Building on a body of work exploring the significance of efficacy on turnout in youth,<sup>42</sup> and factors accounting for differential efficacy within this, I suggest that in order to truly understand how social positioning mitigates absolute education effects, attention must be paid to its potential role in shaping individual’s perceptions of self and of politics.

Research tells us that a perceived lack of civic skills and understanding can lower electors’ confidence in participating at elections.<sup>43</sup> While this might be influenced by absolute education and based on formal knowledge, relative education considerations can also play a role. For instance, when viewing their political knowledge and skill in the context of levels assumed to be possessed in wider society, non-HE individuals may feel especially ill-prepared to participate. They may have sufficient skills where citizenship education at school, for example, in theory encourages them to participate politically.<sup>44</sup> The rising of the school leaving age also ensures a higher level of “basic” education than previous generations, applied to areas of literacy and numeracy. Their relative position, however, could leave them believing themselves less capable in fields deemed “intellectual”. Increasingly viewed as “below average”, a self-fulfilling prophecy can take

effect.<sup>45</sup> Contrastingly, individuals attaining high levels of educational success are more likely to possess a general self-efficacy given their higher position in any academic hierarchy. They are typically more confident in their cognitive abilities being transferable from their academic and life pursuits into electoral activity, whether they are wholly politically informed or not.<sup>46</sup> There is therefore a potential exacerbating effect related to internal political efficacy.

Individuals might also make assessments of their influence in the political system itself on the basis of their relative position. For example, they can draw on experiences of success (or failure) in influencing others alongside how much control they hold over situations important to them. Young people lacking their own political history must look to non-political life experiences, such as how effective they are in their local communities, workplaces, and colleges to determine how efficacious they feel.<sup>47</sup> Those with HE experience tend to enjoy greater attention from elites and experience more opportunities for engagement in decision-making more generally, thus increasing their sense of influence. Their high social status can also ensure that they feel in possession of political voice, adopting “upwardly mobile” thinking based on expectations of future position.<sup>48</sup> Conversely, individuals without HE experience, as a marginalised group, may feel they lack voice given their distance from important decision-making networks.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, with the demographic profile of politicians reflecting societal trends and university qualifications seemingly having become almost a prerequisite,<sup>50</sup> they could also feel unrepresented. There is the potential for a “critical citizen” among disadvantaged groups, one who is cynical about politics’ openness and responsiveness to them as individuals of relatively lower social standing.<sup>51</sup>

## Data and methods

The following analysis employs cross-sectional data and causal modelling. As Persson states, “[i]f we have data on the causal mechanism it is possible to use cross-sectional data – without information about the contextual levels of education” to test relative education effects.<sup>52</sup> Based on the discussions above, my aim is to assess whether education operates through three hypothesised mechanisms – internal efficacy, external efficacy, and social network interactions – and equally if one carries



more explanatory power than another. Furthermore, how might these forces interact and vary in their effects across different educational groups? My dependent variable is individual turnout at the 2010 general election. While this is self-reported, methodological studies suggest that using this indicator is unlikely to significantly corrupt either the relationships between variables or their estimated effects in regression models.<sup>53</sup> To test this, the following analyses have been conducted both unweighted and using a youth turnout weight<sup>54</sup> to control for self-report biases. While absolute turnout levels demonstrate over-reporting, the strength and significance of relationships in the models appear unaffected.

“Young people lacking their own political history must look to non-political life experiences [...] to determine how efficacious they feel.”

The data are taken from the online component of the 2011 Citizens in Transition Study (CITS).<sup>55</sup> The survey received responses from 2,010 18-25 year olds across the UK to investigate attitudes and behaviours within civic engagement, including their political views, citizenship learning, and perceptions of “citizenship”.<sup>56</sup> Its youth focus is a major advantage with both a larger youth sample and wider array of youth-specific variables than usually found in other UK surveys of citizenship and political activity. This extends to a more nuanced record of current education status which can differentiate between HE and further education (FE),<sup>57</sup> for example. As a quota sample from a pre-existing panel community there are limits on the extent to which inferential techniques can be confidently applied.<sup>58</sup> Research in the field of political participation nevertheless suggests internet quota samples often compare favourably with those collected through in-person interviews and probability sampling.<sup>59</sup> It should not prevent robust analysis. Equally, to increase confidence in results’ representativeness respondents have been compared against available population statistics with satisfactory results.<sup>60</sup>

To study the proposed causal paths, I employ structural equation modelling (SEM) using IBM SPSS Amos 21 alongside logistic regression.<sup>61</sup> Such techniques have been used recently to test sorting model-type effects – specifically its traditional assumptions regarding social network centrality

– in Sweden,<sup>62</sup> suggesting it as a suitable method for this analysis. SEM also permits the testing and creation of latent indicators to capture the three key concepts thought to be mediating the role of education on turnout. In order to mitigate the possibility that not all respondents were eligible to have voted in 2010 due to their age, I exclude those who would not have been aged 18 at the time of the election.<sup>63</sup> Where age is subsequently referenced it refers to age at the time of the election. A five-category education scale variable is used in initial descriptive statistics (No HE or FE; FE student; HE undergraduate; HE postgraduate; HE graduate no longer studying), collapsed to what appears – as demonstrated by these initial summaries – a more useful three-category scale when modelling (No HE or FE; FE student; HE experience).

To establish if and how participation patterns can be explained through social positioning I use six variables, all measured on Likert scales of agreement (strongly disagree; disagree; neither agree nor disagree; agree; strongly agree). These are displayed in Table 1 and cover the three mediating concepts. While social network interactions are not strictly measured in terms of

position and connections, the variables chosen reflect the degree to which young people themselves believe they interact within politicised circles, capturing the likelihood of political norms being transferred. A purely social network position indicator, by contrast, requires more assumptions about the level of politicisation attached to particular occupations or roles, and is less appropriate for young people who are yet to leave education and make similar formal connections. The external and internal efficacy variables consider the extent to which individuals believe they can influence politics and affect change, and how politically literate and capable they believe themselves to be, respectively. Each is coded between zero and one with reverse coding applied where relevant so a score of zero reflects a negative response and a score of one a positive response.

## Results

In a simple two-way test, turnout varies in the sample according to educational experiences and in such a way that supports traditional assumptions, including those within a relative education effects model (even if in the unweighted sample over-reporting is evident).<sup>64</sup> Graduates and postgraduates

**Table 1: Sorting model variables across educational groups and correlated with turnout at the 2010 UK General Election**

	Variable	% strongly agree and agree					Correlation with 2010 General Election turnout (Cramer's V)
		No HE/FE	FE	HE (UG)	HE (PG)	Grad.	
Social network interactions	My friends are not interested in politics ( <b>fnoint</b> )*	46.3 (606)	40.6 (202)	39.3 (453)	32.1 (187)	39.5 (296)	.084 (.017), Negative
	I often discuss politics with other people ( <b>discuss</b> )*	26.5 (654)	34.6 (208)	40.8 (465)	44.2 (190)	36.5 (304)	.219 (.000), Positive
External efficacy	People like me can have real influence on government if they get involved ( <b>infgov1</b> )*	29.0 (599)	32.3 (195)	40.8 (434)	39.8 (186)	37.2 (290)	.122 (.000), Positive
	When local people campaign together they can help to solve problems in the community ( <b>loccam1</b> )*	57.3 (613)	57.3 (197)	70.0 (438)	65.2 (187)	70.2 (295)	.082 (.023), Positive
Internal efficacy	Sometimes politics seems so complicated I cannot understand what's going on ( <b>compliR1</b> )*	62.4 (650)	64.7 (207)	57.7 (461)	49.7 (189)	56.4 (305)	.139 (.000), Negative
	I know less about politics than most people my age ( <b>knowR1</b> )*	25.9 (627)	25.7 (202)	19.9 (449)	19.5 (189)	15.2 (295)	.193 (.000), Negative

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); youth turnout weight; total N for each educational group on each question from which to interpret; ages displayed in parentheses; \*Chi-square test p<.01

were most likely to report having voted in 2010 (75.5% and 72.3%), suggesting that completion of a degree, closer proximity to “adulthood”, and more years spent in education engenders greater turnout potential. Interestingly however, while HE undergraduates were unsurprisingly next – 63.4% – the least participative were those young people currently studying in FE. They voted at a rate of just 44.4% compared to 56.0% of young people not pursuing any post-compulsory schooling [ $\chi^2$  (4,  $n=1,845$ ) = 76.803,  $p$  = .000, Cramer’s  $V$  = .204]. Therefore while an education advantage is clear for HE students and graduates, this is less apparent for those in FE. This starts to suggest that social position considerations attached to different types of education might be important and not only objective absolute education levels. FE, while in theory providing “more” education than experienced by the non-student group, is typically afforded less prestige.<sup>65</sup>

**“Turnout varies in the sample according to educational experiences and in such a way that supports traditional assumptions [...]”**

Table 1 presents summary statistics across each of the proposed positioning-effects variables. These demonstrate that social network interactions – specifically the likelihood of discussing politics with other people – has the strongest correlation with turnout in 2010. This supports the view that socio-political positioning and associated network experiences are especially important in determining whether an individual votes. However, simply being around politically interested individuals does not seem to be as significant, downplaying the probability that turnout is influenced by environmental positioning alone. Social network effects may need to be direct, overt, and forceful to support electoral recruitment; perhaps because young people are still in the process of forming political identities.

Individuals lacking post-compulsory education are most likely to agree that their friends are not interested in politics. This implies that any form of post-compulsory education can be important in determining whether individuals feel located in politically engaged networks. On discussing politics however, with on-course HE students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) being most likely to do so, there are suggestions

that universities themselves can be especially politicising and offer distinct opportunities for participation which are not necessarily enjoyed by other young people.

Internal efficacy also appears related to voting; respondents strongly disagreeing with both statements, implying they feel confident in their political knowledge, are more likely to have voted in 2010. The correlation is marginally stronger when they are asked to make subjective comparisons against other young people (“I know less about politics than most people my age”). There are also indications from these variables that individuals alter their assessments of their own political understanding between absolute and relative measures. A quarter of young people with no HE experience strongly agreed and agreed with the statement “I know less about politics than most people my age” (25.9%). In contrast, just 18.3% of those respondents with HE experience (both current and past) strongly agreed and agreed with the statement [ $\chi^2$  (4,  $n=1,762$ ) = 24.619,  $p$  = .000], despite 55.7% still claiming politics often feels too complicated for them to understand. FE students, despite ongoing education and skills development – albeit more vocational than academic – do not appear to perceive themselves as equal in political knowledge to young people attending university. This suggests that among the current generation of young people, post-compulsory education is only positively associated with increased confidence in political knowledge when pursued at the HE level.<sup>66</sup>

**“Universities themselves can be especially politicising and offer distinct opportunities for participation which are not necessarily enjoyed by other young people.”**

On external efficacy, the impact of the two component variables on turnout is comparatively weak, suggesting young people pay less attention to how they can affect politics and their perceptions of politics more broadly when deciding whether or not to vote than they do towards their own abilities. There is nevertheless a slightly greater chance of voting in respect of those individuals who believe they can influence politics, and this is also positively correlated with education. Young people with HE experiences are more likely than those without – again including FE students – to believe their participation can affect change. Thus indi-

viduals may still give weight to the prestige and status enjoyed by their different types of educational experience when assessing external efficacy with existing institutions,<sup>67</sup> even if this is less notable for turnout.

Logistic regression provides an initial exploration of how, when combined, the factors identified above contribute to young people’s turnout decisions (Table 2).<sup>68</sup> The first model includes all those variables discussed above, while the second includes further demographic controls to test whether the observed relationships remain after taking account of additional variation within the youth population. Education has been collapsed into three categories based on the distinctions identified within Table 1 between no post-compulsory education, FE, and HE. Comparing Models I and II, the inclusion of demographic controls results in only minor changes to the effect sizes of the mechanism variables and there is relative stability in whether these make significant contributions. There is improved model fit with an increased Nagelkerke  $R^2$ , both models correctly classifying just under two-thirds of cases and reporting good (non-significant) Hosmer-Lemeshow tests.

By studying Model II it is found that despite controlling for proposed relative education mechanisms, education continues to exert its own significant influence over turnout decisions. HE young people are more likely to have voted in 2010 than FE students and those individuals with no post-compulsory education. FE students are again the least likely educational group to have voted, being 60.5% less likely than HE individuals to turn out, whereas for young people with no HE or FE experience the probability of voting is only 40.4% lower. Therefore, despite FE students having experience of post-compulsory schooling and an arguably higher educational level than those never attending either an FE or HE institution, they are not more likely to vote. This reaffirms claims that absolute education may not tell us the whole story. It nevertheless also suggests positioning, at least through the concepts and indicators tested here, is also not solely responsible for the patterns we observe.

**“Young people with HE experiences are more likely than those without to believe their participation can affect change.”**

The results relating to the social positioning variables are mixed. Internal efficacy appears important but only when related to young people's subjective assessments of political literacy. If comparing themselves to other young people, individuals strongly disagreeing that they know less about politics than others are 1.8 times more likely to have voted in 2010 than those who strongly agree. This reflects propositions that relative education impacts on perceptions of self and ability through comparative reflection. External efficacy is only significant when thinking about political influence (and  $p < .1$ ). Young people believing they can influence government through their involvement are 1.5 times more likely to have voted in 2010 than those who do not. On the third proposed mechanism, that of the individual's experiences within their social networks, there is again strong support for suggesting individuals who discuss politics with others are more likely to vote. Here they are almost three times more likely to have voted than those who do not.

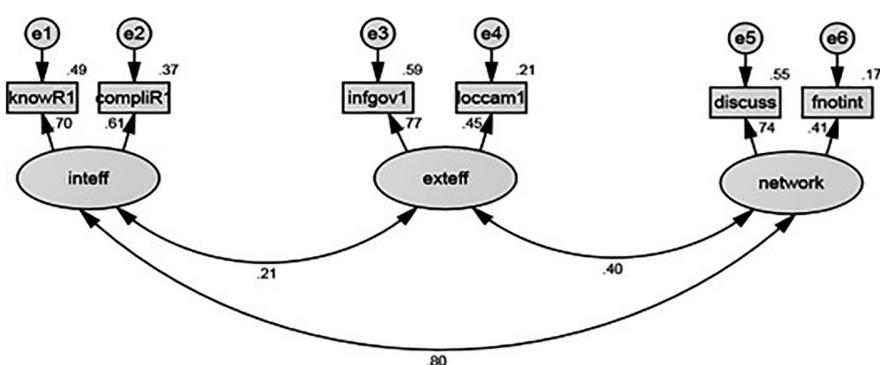


Figure 2: Confirmatory factor analysis: internal political efficacy, external political efficacy and social and political environment (standardised results). Chi-square 240.020 (6 d.f.),  $p = .000$ , RMSEA = .055, CFI = .974. Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses),  $n = 1,883$

What the logistic regression cannot tell us, however, is the extent to which the proposed mechanisms interact and mediate the effects of absolute individual-level education on turnout. SEM can be used to develop these investigations further (see Schreiber et al. 2006; Persson 2014). While SEM of the type which now follows typically requires a dependent variable measured at the interval

level, I use this as a way of testing potential interactions to be later reapplied, as discussed, within a logistic regression model. I have conducted an initial confirmatory factor analysis (Figure 2) to develop the three latent concepts of internal efficacy, external efficacy, and political interactions within social networks (RMSEA  $< .06$ , CFI  $> .95$ ). The total sample size is 1,883 with missing data handled by expectation-maximisation. After a process of model testing, Figures 3, 4 and 5 (below) appear most helpful for examining the issue, determined both by theory and model fit statistics. Building on the confirmatory factor analysis' suggestions of positive correlation between the three mediating latent variables, the path diagrams estimate not only their individual impacts on turnout, but also how they relate to each other. For instance, it may be that individuals who engage in political discussions can increase their political knowledge and understanding by doing so. Alternatively, individuals with high levels of political knowledge and understanding may seek out networks of politically engaged individuals. In reality, it is likely to be a bit of both with mutually reinforcing effects. However, adoption of relative education thinking – which is concerned more with environment – would suggest the former will be more significant, individuals assessing their levels of efficacy based not simply on absolute education but on social positioning also. Including paths of this nature in the models improved model fit (RMSEA  $< .06$ , CFI  $> .95$ ). They explain 11, 8 and 9% of the variance in turnout respectively. Each path diagram compares two specific educational groups and excludes the remaining third group. This is to test where variation across educational groups specifically emerges. Significant relationships are identified by bold arrows.

Table 2: Binary logistic regression: youth turnout at the 2010 General Election

	I		II	
	B (s.e)	Exp(B)	B (s.e)	Exp(B)
<b>Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>				
No post-compulsory education	.505 (.122)***	.603	-.517 (.135)***	.596
FE student	-.943 (.175)***	.389	-.929 (.186)***	.395
<b>Internal efficacy</b>				
Sometimes politics so complicated cannot understand (high = strongly disagree)	.300 (.237)	1.350	.293 (.258)	1.340
I know less about politics (high = strongly disagree)	.754 (.250)***	2.125	.583 (.266)**	1.791
<b>External efficacy</b>				
People like me can influence government by getting involved (high = strongly agree)	.165 (.227)	1.180	.398 (.240)*	1.490
Local people campaigning can solve problems (high = strongly agree)	.300 (.278)	1.351	.189 (.291)	1.208
<b>Social networks</b>				
My friends are not interested in politics (high = strongly disagree)	-.081 (.232)	.922	.123 (.248)	1.131
I often discuss politics with other people (high = strongly agree)	1.009 (.226)***	2.742	1.060 (.244)***	2.885
<b>Age (reference = 22-24 years)</b>				
18-19 years			-.401 (.149)***	.670
20-21 years			-.392 (.145)***	.676
<b>Gender (comparison = male)</b>				
			-.127 (.133)	.881
<b>Ethnicity (comparison = White British)</b>				
			-.928 (.146)***	.395
<b>Parent social class (reference = higher managerial)</b>				
Never worked/LT unemployed			.602 (.311)*	1.825
Routine and manual			-.283 (.152)*	.754
Intermediate			-.139 (.148)	.870
Constant	-.432 (.241)*		.092 (.294)	
-2LL	1890.225		1703.176	
Model significance	117.758***		165.595***	
Hosmer-Lemeshow	1.675		4.963	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	.101		.150	
% correctly classified	65.2		67.7	
N	1528		1435	

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); unweighted; \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .1$



In every instance, individual educational experience has a significant and positive effect on how politicised an individual's social networks are, which offers early support for a proposed social positioning role. This is strongest when distinguishing between HE individuals and those with no post-compulsory schooling; having HE experience generates a .22 standard deviation increase in being located among politically engaged social networks. Interestingly, this effect size is weakest when comparing only FE and HE individuals (a standardised coefficient of just .08), suggesting educational positioning variation in networks is less evident between young people who have at least some post-compulsory education. This is further observed where FE students have an increased probability of being positioned in political networks compared to those with no post-compulsory schooling (Figure 5).

“Young people believing they can influence government through their involvement are 1.5 times more likely to have voted in 2010 than those who do not.”

Thus positioning does appear to take effect in youth, and educational experiences can play an important role in determining this. Individuals with HE experience will nearly always encounter stronger political

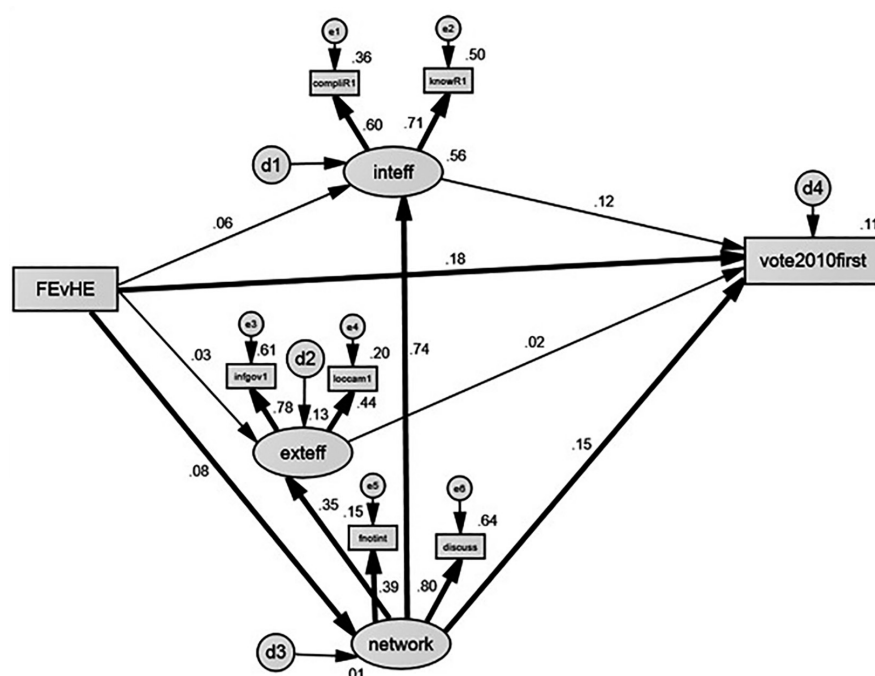


Figure 3: FE versus HE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 263.840 (13 d.f.),  $p=.000$ , RMSEA =.046, CFI =.965. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses),  $n=1,883$

mobilisation forces within their social networks than any other young person, while those at the very bottom of the educational hierarchy, absent from any educational institution, face a disadvantage in this regard. FE students, while perhaps enjoying lower status than HE students, may still access

political groups, the UK's National Union of Students, for example, representing both educational sectors.

The effects of individual education on internal and external efficacy are by contrast much smaller and insignificant. Social networks are nevertheless found to have significant and positive relationships with internal and external efficacy constructs within each model. For example, by applying the causal direction implied by the sorting model, a one point increase in political network interactions leads to a .74 or .75 standard deviation increase in internal efficacy in each model. The average effect size on external efficacy is much smaller (only a standardised coefficient of .35). Absolute education may not therefore determine differences between young people on these latent constructs but their educationally-influenced socio-political interactions with others do, suggesting this effect of education is only ever indirect for these attitudinal characteristics. While this to some extent undermines expectations about efficacy, it reinforces and elaborates on the role of social networks in shaping how young people view their own political ability. It also implies educational positioning potentially operates through a two-stage process. First it situates young people within particular contexts, locations, and networks. It is then from this that they develop perceptions of their own ability to engage in and influence politics.

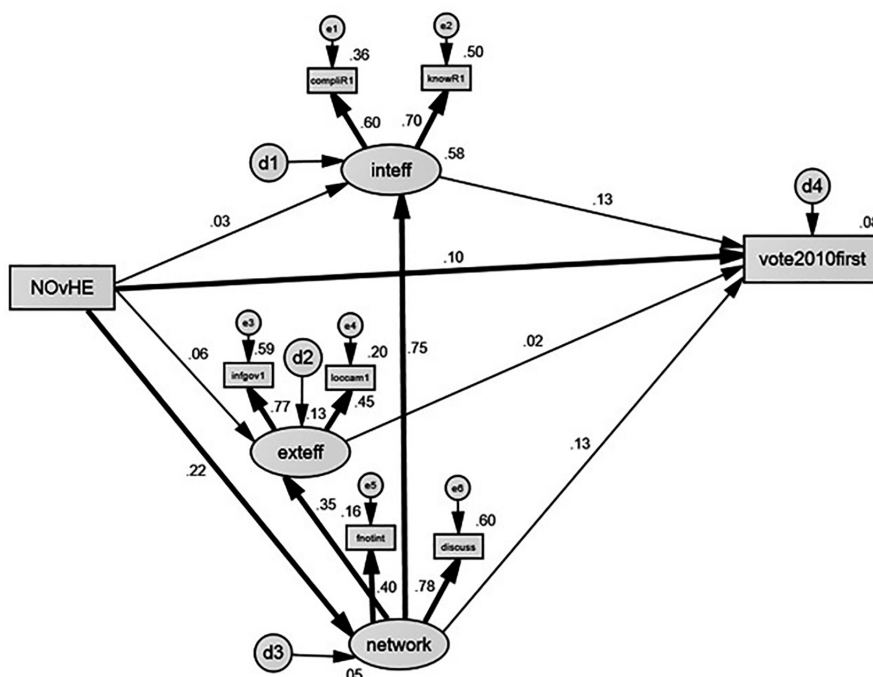


Figure 4: No compulsory schooling versus HE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 276.012 (13 d.f.),  $p=.000$ , RMSEA =.051, CFI =.958. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses),  $n=1,883$



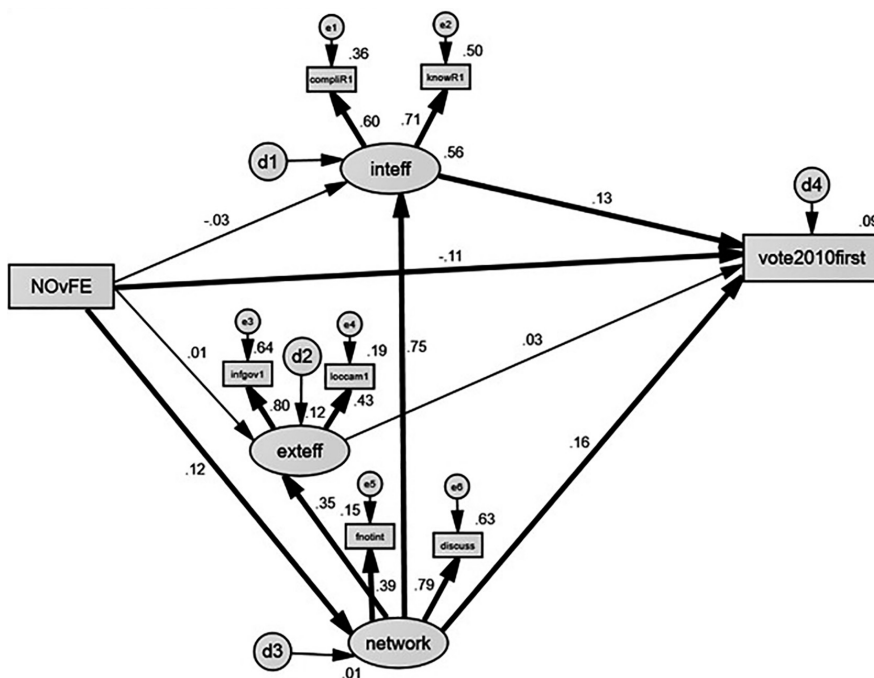


Figure 5: No compulsory schooling versus FE experience and 2010 turnout (standardised results); Chi-square 254.698 (13 d.f.),  $p = .000$ , RMSEA = .041, CFI = .971. Source: 2011 CITS (Online responses),  $n = 1,883$

However, in agreement with the dominant emphasis on social networks in existing discussions of relative education effects, of the three latent constructs it is social networks which most consistently have a significant ( $p < .05$ ) direct impact on being a voter at the 2010 general election – binary turnout variable acting as scale between 0 and 1 for purposes of the SEM. This is evidenced both when comparing HE and FE (Figure 3) and no post-compulsory education and FE (Figure 5). The relationship is positive and supports recent research which has suggested social networks are more important for individuals with low levels of education when turnout decisions are made.<sup>69</sup> However, differing levels of perceived political ability, while also positively associated with greater turnout, is significant in just one model (Figure 5 – FE vs. no post-compulsory education). Thus the two-stage process, while often evident, may not in all instances be important for turnout. For individuals with HE experience, for example, it would seem social networks are more central, implying mobilisation and not perceived ability explains their higher level of turnout. Nevertheless, social networks are not a significant turnout indicator when comparing HE with no post-compulsory education.

The SEM approach, as with the logistic regression, additionally suggests that education acts through mechanisms not

covered by the chosen conceptualisations of relative education effects here. It has a significant direct effect on the turnout indicator in each model. Consequently, when controlling for concepts of perceived political understanding and social environment, we still find individuals with HE experiences

being closer to being a voter (a score of 1) than those without. This to some extent undermines the adoption of a solely relative education model. There may, for example, still be a rationale for assigning some role to a more absolute education concept, perhaps relating to objective indicators of knowledge and skill. However, absolute education has a negative association with turnout in Figure 5. It consequently suggests that the relationship is still not straightforward. Additional education, if only pursued at a FE level, does not provide a turnout advantage. The findings therefore offer some support for the view that one of education's most important roles in affecting turnout and preventing non-HE young people from voting at higher rates is in shaping the networks with which young people come into contact. The higher their level of their education, the higher the probability that they interact with others in a way which could be considered politically stimulating. Importantly, this then influences efficacy which can, on occasion, further strengthen this impact of positioning.

To explore the potential interaction effects further, I have conducted a second logistic regression model with an interaction term included between social networks and educational experiences. New variables have been computed for the three latent

Table 3: Binary logistic regression: youth turnout at the 2010 General Election (with interactions)

	B (s.e)	Exp(B)
<b>Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>		
No post-compulsory education	-.801 (.300)***	.449
FE student	.229 (.442)	1.384
<b>Internal efficacy (high = highly efficacious)</b>	.990 (.307)***	2.691
<b>External efficacy (high = highly efficacious)</b>	.745 (.299)**	2.106
<b>Social networks (high = highly politicised networks)</b>	1.294 (.406)***	3.646
<b>Social networks*Educational status (comparison = HE experience)</b>		
Social networks*No post-compulsory education	.786 (.625)	2.194
Social networks* FE student	-2.506 (.839)***	.082
<b>Age (reference = 22-24 years)</b>		
18-19 years	-.403 (.150)***	.668
20-21 years	-.369 (.145)**	.692
<b>Gender (comparison = male)</b>	-.115 (.132)	.891
<b>Ethnicity (comparison = White British)</b>	-.957 (.145)***	.384
<b>Parent social class (reference = higher managerial)</b>		
Never worked/LT unemployed	.622 (.308)**	1.863
Routine and manual	-.288 (.153)*	.750
Intermediate	-.154 (.148)	.858
<b>Constant</b>	-.097 (.302)	
<b>-2LL</b>	1696.969	
<b>Model significance</b>	171.802***	
<b>Hosmer-Lemeshow</b>	8.453	
<b>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></b>	.155	
<b>% correctly classified</b>	67.8	
<b>N</b>	1435	

Source: CITS 2011 (Online responses); youth turnout weight, \*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .1$

variables by averaging each respondent's scores across the two component indicators. Demographic variables have also been re-introduced at this stage to ensure any variation is controlled for. The results (Table 3) suggest there are significant positive interaction effects between education and social networks. Figure 6 presents this interaction, showing that political social networks are particularly important for boosting turnout potential in HE and non-post-compulsory education groups. Both see turnout potential increase as the social networks score increases. This is most marked for individuals with no additional education, which suggests they may be particularly dependent on being mobilised by others to vote, whereas individuals with HE experience already have a stronger predisposition to do so. Interestingly however, social networks appear to have a negative impact on turnout for FE students. This suggests alternative factors may be intervening to lower their turnout potential and counteract any positive influence of politically engaged peers. Equally, it might be that as a (perceived to be) marginalised group, increased political awareness and discussions may in fact encourage greater cynicism and disaffection – a more critical citizen response – in which alternative participation preferences develop.<sup>70</sup>

## Discussion

The analysis in this paper makes a number of contributions to existing thinking on how relative education effects help explain persistent turnout inequalities in youth. These in turn offer thoughts for why the increase in young people's average education level on its own has so far failed to raise youth turnout and is unlikely to do so in the future. Of interest is that theories associated with relative education and social positioning do appear to be applicable to young people, at least in a UK context. Previous research on the sorting model has concentrated almost exclusively on those over the age of 25/6 years, arguing that by still being in the process of becoming educated, younger people do not present as comparable cases.<sup>71</sup>

"The findings therefore offer some support for the view that one of education's most important roles in affecting turnout [...] is in shaping the networks with which young people come into contact."

Analysis here, however, suggests young people with HE experience, past or ongoing, are also more likely to report having interactions within politically engaged social networks than those without. This is true even against those young people with FE

experience. The implication is that status and position attached to and/or derived from education can be especially important in determining the type and level of political socialisation an individual is subject to during their formative years. In addition, there is a positive association between this and whether or not an individual turns out. Therefore, education's positive effects on electoral participation appear to be mediated by the types of people individuals come into contact with through their educational experiences. Simply entering a university environment can boost turnout potential through these mechanisms.<sup>72</sup> In contrast, even if individuals outwith HE are staying at school longer and completing higher levels of qualification, they will not necessarily encounter pro-voting mobilising forces.

It must also be acknowledged that the positive impact of more political social networks is not universally felt across young people. It appears particularly important for young people without any post-compulsory education experience, implying that if political actors are to encourage their turnout, increasing mobilisation through network interactions will be key to any success. This might mean developing strategies which generate new and alternative forums for political discussion and encourage peer-to-peer debate. Lowering the voting age to increase the number of young people experiencing their first vote while still at school, in a politicising education environment, could offer one solution. They will enjoy encouragement and support irrespective of their post-compulsory education choices. Citizenship education as a remedy too may present such an opportunity, targeting young people before more noticeable educational distinctions emerge. However, with demographic variation across schools – and, we might assume, politicisation of students – as well as the freedom many schools can use to bypass the National Curriculum, it is at present limited in its potential effectiveness.

Moreover, FE students demonstrate falling turnout potential even when they come to interact in politicised social networks. For this group it appears not enough to hope that raising interest and awareness through social network activities will increase their propensity to vote. Thinking about their relative status, they may still engage in discussions of politics when opportunities for debate arise but, as Holmes and Manning<sup>73</sup> would suggest, they do so more

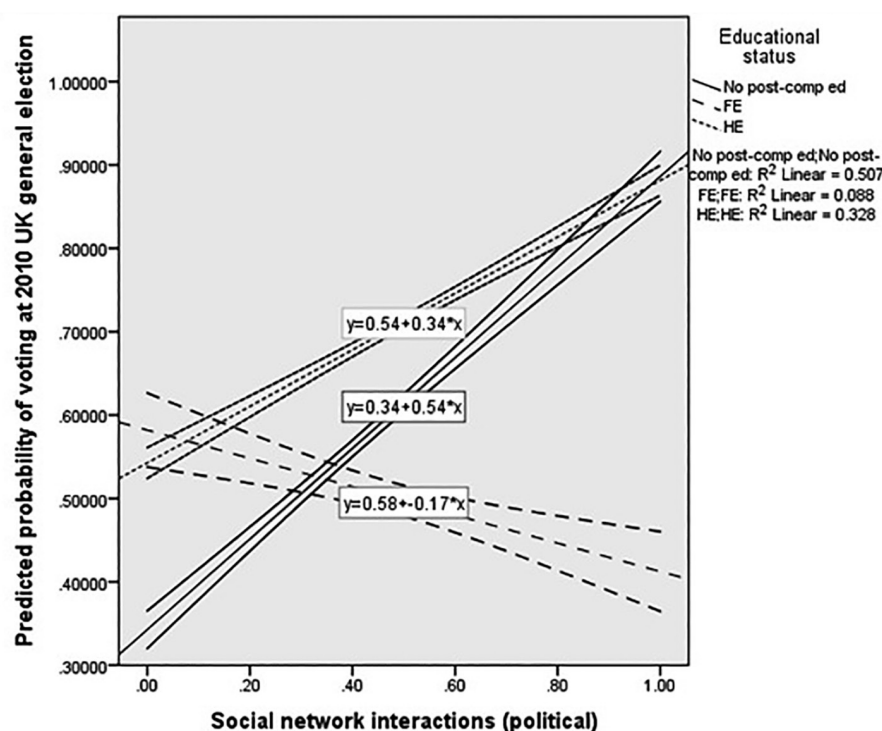


Figure 6: Mean predicted probability for 2010 General Election turnout by social network interactions and educational status

when perceiving themselves as marginalised or unrepresented. When around politicised individuals they may become more aware of their disadvantage and as such, more critical. It is also possible that they then direct political energy into alternative, non-electoral activities.<sup>74</sup> This remains something to be tested. Nevertheless, suggestions are that allowing young people the space to talk about politics will only sometimes boost turnout potential. In some cases, other interventions are required to channel this energy into voting specifically.

**“Status and position attached to [...] or derived from education can be especially important in determining the type and level of political socialisation an individual is subject to during their formative years.”**

Relative education's relationship with turnout appears to be not solely connected to social networks but also to internal efficacy, albeit indirectly. For instance, FE students are found to sit closer to individuals with no post-compulsory education on efficacy indicators despite their continued presence in educational institutions. This implies that feelings of political ability are not shaped purely by formal learning processes as is commonly assumed. While absolute education differences could undoubtedly influence the skills and knowledge transferred to individuals to facilitate or discourage political participation, suggestions within this analysis are that it is through the networks young people engage with, often resulting from their varied educational experiences, which lead them to develop different levels of political confidence. Being located within politically engaged circles can therefore heighten individuals' feelings of political comprehension and literacy, given how young people judge their capacity for participation against that of other young people. Where individuals feel and are excluded from political networks they report being less confident in their ability to participate and may subsequently envisage greater participation costs due to their perceived “deficiencies” or disadvantage. They will also likely encounter fewer opportunities to build their confidence in this area if they do not have the chance to converse with politically engaged individuals.

While internal efficacy is not always a significant determinant of turnout, it does appear to be important in the decision-making process of FE students. Thus strategies here

will need to consider how the political discussions many of these individuals appear to have can be supplemented by activities which will boost their political confidence. Citizenship education may again be a possible remedy, initiatives with a greater focus on *electoral* politics being integrated into existing conversations to ensure all young people are encouraged to make linkages between the politics they encounter in their daily lives and the formal political world. Finding non-educational institutions to deliver this training and support, so that no young person is disadvantaged, will also be important.<sup>75</sup> This may mean running sessions in youth offending institutes and/or finding ways to incorporate political learning into more vocational, apprenticeship training.

Significantly however, external efficacy is not a significant or powerful determinant of turnout, nor is it directly related to education. As with internal efficacy, social networks play some role in shaping perceptions of influence and power in politics – again providing possible evidence of relative education effects – and yet no educational group appears to decide their electoral behaviour on these considerations. This is interesting in that it suggests their abstention relates less to their demands of the political system and more to their position and experiences in politics and society. Thus for non-HE individuals, strategies would still appear best directed at improving their political socialisation and learning.

**“Being located within politically engaged circles can [...] heighten individuals' feelings of political comprehension and literacy.”**

Finally, we see that education has an effect on turnout beyond the proposed positioning mechanisms. It continues to exert a significant influence even controlling for efficacy and social networks. This suggests there are untested effects which our proposed and tested operationalization of a relative education model cannot adequately explain. These could relate to absolute education effects – for example, a more objective measure of political knowledge – as is frequently posited by a civic education hypothesis.<sup>76</sup> This would imply educational expansion may yet have a role to play in boosting youth turnout. However, there may also be other indicator variables reflective of relative education effects which

could develop the model, for example wider social environmental factors and alternative efficacy measures which are not available in the CITS.

What do these contributions mean for the youth turnout? Support is found for a view that youth turnout will fail to rise in line with education while access to political social networks continues to vary according to the type of education a young person has received and is receiving. HE today affords young people a much higher status than other types of education and consequently provides them with more opportunities to be mobilised and recruited into politics. Moreover, it can go on to shape young people's perceptions of their own understanding of politics and, it can be inferred, their overall ability to participate in politics. Individuals without HE, regardless of their absolute education level and how this corresponds to the education levels of earlier generations, are by contrast less likely to interact with political networks. The probabilities of their encountering direct encouragement and/or risking social costs by abstaining are therefore lower. Social inequalities will persist and in turn, so too will participation inequalities; average levels of education can be altered but the existence of a corresponding hierarchy appears entrenched. Educational settings may still provide a vehicle for politicisation and yet it will not be sufficient to rely on building a more educated electorate to increase turnout. Instead, remedies will require looking at those factors related to education in a relative sense – the networks it positions individuals in and the resultant internal efficacy this engenders – to overcome obstacles which remain to the (relatively) less well-educated youth participating.

## Notes

1 The author was supported through PhD studentship funding from the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/J500136/1].

2 Mayer 2011: 633.

3 Verba et al. 1995; Wolfinger/Rosenstone 1980; Hillygus 2005; Berinsky/Lenz 2011; Mayer 2011; Burden 2009; Galston 2001; Dee 2004; Gallego 2009, 2010; Straughn/Andriot 2011; Tenn 2007.

4 Brody 1978.

5 UK education at degree-awarding institutions on courses where level of instruction is above GCE/VCE A Levels or SCE Highers/Advanced Highers (HESA 2012).

6 UCAS 2010.



- 7 Ipsos-MORI 2010.
- 8 Plutzer 2002.
- 9 Goerres 2008; Berry 2014.
- 10 Norris 2002, 2003; Dalton 2008.
- 11 Smets 2012.
- 12 Whiteley 2012: 48.
- 13 Nie et al. 1996.
- 14 Whiteley et al. 2013.
- 15 Dee 2004: 1713; see also Tenn 2007.
- 16 Hillygus 2005; Wolfinger/Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al. 1995.
- 17 Gallego 2009, 2010, 2015.
- 18 Henn/Foard 2012: 53-4.
- 19 Hillygus 2005.
- 20 See Keating et al. 2010; Whiteley 2014. Changes to education since this date, notably the creation of academies and free schools which operate under less government control and outside of the National Curriculum, alongside more general variability in teaching of citizenship education may have led to differential experiences of young people (Kerr 2014).
- 21 Cone et al. 2001: 6.
- 22 Alt et al. (no date), Clarke et al. (2003, 2006), Crewe et al. (no date a, no date b), Heath et al. (no date, 1993a), Heath et al. (1993b), Heath et al. (1999), Whiteley/Sanders (2014).
- 23 Nie et al. 1996.
- 24 Helliwell/Putnam 2007.
- 25 Nie et al. 1996; Campbell 2009; Persson 2011, 2013; Tenn 2005; Rolfe 2012.
- 26 Campbell 2009: 772; Tenn 2005; Nie et al. 1996; Furlong/Cartmel 2007.
- 27 Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009; Helliwell/Putnam 2007; Persson 2011, 2013.
- 28 Pattie and Johnston 2000: 44.
- 29 Persson 2014: 726.
- 30 Nie et al. 1996; Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009; Persson 2011.
- 31 Bennett 1991; Fieldhouse/Cutts 2012; Henn/Foard 2014; Munson 2010.
- 32 See Brennan/Osborne 2008.
- 33 1996; see also Persson 2014; Campbell 2009; Rolfe 2012.
- 34 Verba et al. 1995; Rosenstone/Hansen 1993.
- 35 Condon/Holleque 2013; Armingeon/Schädel 2015.
- 36 Ulbig/Waggener 2011.
- 37 Tenn 2005.
- 38 Flanagan et al. 2012; Gallego 2009; Wray-Lake/Hart 2012; Gray/Caul 2000; Furlong/Cartmel 2007; Armingeon/Schädel 2015.
- 39 Franklin 2004: 51; Blais 2000; Campbell 2013; Gerber et al. 2008.
- 40 Kenny 1992; Shulman/Levine 2012.
- 41 Campbell 2013; Pattie/Johnston 2000; Fieldhouse/Cutts 2012; Cutts/Fieldhouse 2009.
- 42 Levy 2013; Beaumont 2011; Condon/Holleque 2013; Henn/Foard 2012, 2014; Gecas 1989.
- 43 Gallego 2010; see also Nie et al. 1996: 11-94.
- 44 Keating et al. 2010; Whiteley 2014.
- 45 Tenn 2005.
- 46 Condon/Holleque 2013; Levy 2013; Gecas 1989; Collingwood 2012.
- 47 Condon/Holleque 2013; Gecas 1989; Levy 2013; Leighley 1995: 186.
- 48 Kaufmann/Feldman 2004: 482-483; Weakliem 1992: 153-155.
- 49 Levy 2013; Tenn 2005; Condon/Holleque 2013; Henn/Foard 2014; Wray-Lake/Hart 2012; Gecas 1989; Dimer/Li 2011.
- 50 Smith Institute 2010.
- 51 Holmes/Manning 2013; Diemer/Li 2011; Cammaerts et al. 2013; Furlong/Cartmel 2007; Henn/Foard 2014; Harris et al. 2010.
- 52 Persson 2014: 726.
- 53 Bernstein et al. 2001; Cassel 2003; Katosh/Traugott 1981; Sigelman 1982.
- 54 Based on 44% youth turnout in 2010 UK general election (Ipsos-MORI 2010).
- 55 Whiteley et al. 2013.
- 56 Sturman et al. 2012; see also Whiteley 2012a: 5-12.
- 57 Any study after secondary education that is not part of higher education (that is, not taken as part of an undergraduate or graduate degree). (UK Government 2014).
- 58 Gschwend 2005: 89; Fowler 2009: 46; Schofield 2006: 36-37.
- 59 Sanders et al. 2007; Sapsford 2007; see Webb 2013: 751-752.
- 60 Sapsford 2007: 98; Gschwend 2005: 90.
- 61 To ensure consistency with the SEM, all reported statistics relate to unweighted data unless stated otherwise.
- 62 Persson 2014.
- 63 5 May 2010.
- 64 To ensure consistency with the SEM, all reported statistics relate to unweighted data unless stated otherwise.
- 65 Janmaat et al. 2014.
- 66 Henn/Foard 2014: 369.
- 67 Levy 2013: 369.
- 68 Binary logistic models using these variables were compared between youth turnout weighted and unweighted to reveal no noticeable disparities across coefficients – in magnitude, direction, and significance – or in model fit statistics.
- 69 Armingeon/Schädel 2015.
- 70 Norris 2011; Holmes/Manning 2013; Diemer/Li 2011.
- 71 Nie et al. 1996; Tenn 2005; Campbell 2009; Persson 2011.
- 72 Dee 2004; Tenn 2007.
- 73 Holmes/Manning 2013.
- 74 Norris 2002, 2003; Dalton 2008; Martin 2012.
- 75 See Flanagan et al. 2012.
- 76 Hillygus 2015.

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